Student

Lorie Jewell ENC 1101.012

22 March 2016

Testing the Boundaries: Evaluating the Fairness of Standardized Tests

Imagine this: Joseph, a U.S. student in his senior year of high school, is applying to the university he wishes to attend. He has worked hard throughout high school and has a GPA of 3.2, yet when he took the SAT, he received a score of only 900 out of 1600. In many countries, including the U.S., applicants receiving scores this low on a standardized test can severely hinder their chances of being able to pursue higher education opportunities, despite other positive factors on their applications. University admissions officers place a lot of weight on standardized test scores when evaluating students’ applications. In the early 2000s and prior, the rhetoric around the fairness and effectiveness of standardized testing was primarily focused on the issues around the lack racial and ethnic diversity in higher education institutions. Over time, the conversation has shifted to focus more on applicants’ socioeconomic status and inherent qualities such as creativity, but the discussion of the weights of high school grades and class rank in applications has remained relatively the same.

In the early 2000s, affirmative action heavily influenced the conversation around the fairness of standardized tests in university admissions. This led the arguments to focus more on standardized testing’s effect on racial and ethnic diversity in universities. In her 2000 article, Linda F. Wightman, professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, discusses the debate on the presence of affirmative action in higher education institutions’

admissions processes and how standardized testing was fueling this conversation (90). She emphasizes that although many argue that standardized tests are racially biased, “[t]here are literally hundreds of empirical research studies […] demonstrating that admission test scores are positively related to subsequent grades, […] and that test scores are good predictors for all ethnic groups, not just Whites” (94). On the other side of the argument, in her 2002 peer-reviewed article, Christina Perez took the stance that standardized tests provided poor representations of non-white students’ capabilities of performing well in higher education institutions. Perez argues that the SAT I, ACT and SAT II tests all “[show large gaps in scores between students of different racial […] groups, leading to racial […] bias in admission […] formulas that utilize

rigid test score requirements” (24). She also argued that these exams were “placing groups such as […] English as a Second Language learners at a disadvantage since they do not tend to perform as well on timed, multiple-choice exams” than those who are native English-speakers (24).

In more recent years, the rhetoric has shifted to focus less on racial and ethnic diversity in schools and more on applicants’ socioeconomic status and other inherent factors that impacted their chances of being admitted to any particular school. This shift in conversation has also become apparent in other countries such as Chile. In Mladen Koljatic and Monica Silva’s 2013 article, these two faculty members of the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile discuss the effects of an experimental inclusion program in a university in Chile, in which students from very low socioeconomic statuses with the highest grades and class ranks in their respective high schools were given the opportunity for admission despite their low standardized test scores.

Koljatic and Silva highlight that “[t]alented students from low income groups are seriously handicapped for access to higher education in nations where a good quality of education is the

privilege of the wealthy […]” (1437). There are also arguments that standardized tests are biased against other factors besides a student’s socioeconomic status. For example, in his 2011 paper, Stephen J. Dollinger, professor of psychology at Southern Illinois University, discusses the results of a study he conducted in an attempt to prove or disprove the claims that standardized tests, such as the ACT, were unfairly biased against students with more creative minds. He

concludes in his study that “evidence does not support the arguments of more extreme social critics concerning a complete bias of standardized tests against creativity” (331). In recent years, many other scholars have examined the amount of bias standardized tests have for certain inherent characteristics of students.

Over time, one aspect of the rhetoric on the fairness of standardized testing has remained the same: the discussion of how much weight standardized test scores should have versus high school GPAs and class rank in applications for higher education. In 2002 for example, Perez argued that “[…] high school grades, class rank, and rigor of courses do a better job of forecasting college performance than [… the SAT I, SAT II, or ACT] tests” (22). In Koljatic and Silva’s 2013 article, one of their main points was that, despite the side-gate program students’ extremely high grades and ranks in high school, they performed poorly on the standardized test for admission. However, since they were admitted to the program regardless of their test scores, they still exhibited high GPAs in the university, concurrent with their high school performance (1433). Even Stephen Dollinger acknowledges the fact that “critics argue that admissions tests do not add much predictive value over high school performance” (329) in his 2011 article.

In summation, the focus on different aspects of the conversation around the fairness and effectiveness of standardized testing in admissions has changed over time. In the early 2000s, the rhetoric was more focused on the fairness of standardized tests as it pertains to racial and ethnic

equality. Although race and ethnicity are still important parts of this discussion today, in recent years the focus has been drawn to the effects of other inherent factors of applicants, such as socioeconomic status and creativity, on standardized test scores. The amount of focus on the argument of how much weight should be given to test scores versus high school grades has remained relatively the same over time, however. The rhetoric on this topic can surely be expected to continue for as long as standardized tests play such an important role in students’ college applications. While these tests continue to affect the fates of students like Joseph, people will continue to question and discuss the level of fairness of these tests.

Works Cited

Dollinger, Stephen J. "'Standardized Minds’ or Individuality? Admissions Tests And Creativity Revisited." *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 5.4 (2011): 329-341.

*PsycARTICLES*. Web. 18 Feb. 2016.

Koljatic, Mladen, and Monica Silva. "Opening a Side-Gate: Engaging the Excluded in Chilean Higher Education Through Test-Blind Admission." *Studies in Higher Education* 38.10 (2013): 1427. *Web of Science*. Web. 4 Feb. 2016.

Perez, Christina. "Different Tests, Same Flaws: Examining the SAT I, SAT II, and ACT."

*Journal of College Admission* 177 (2002): 20-25. *Wilson Web*. Web. 25 Jan. 2016.

Wightman, Linda F. "The Role of Standardized Admission Tests in the Debate About Merit, Academic Standards, and Affirmative Action." *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* 6.1 (2000): 90-100. *PsycARTICLES*. Web. 6 Mar. 2016.